

VZCZCXRO0831
OO RUEHAG RUEHROV
DE RUEHMO #2590/01 2411513

ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 281513Z AUG 08
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9754
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUEHXD/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MOSCOW 002590

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/27/2018
TAGS: PREL PGOV MARR RS GG
SUBJECT: RUSSIANS REACT TO RECOGNITION: CRITICS
OUTNUMBERED, BUT NOT SILENT

Classified By: Ambassador John R. Beyrle: Reasons 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Public and elite opinion in Russia is split into two, unequal camps over the decision to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The overwhelming majority of the population considers recognition unavoidable (87 percent), given the Georgian "aggression" and the reaction of the international community. Within this group, many see Medvedev's action as an answer to a long list of perceived U.S. slights since the breakup of the Soviet Union and discount the costs Russia will ultimately pay for its actions. On the other end of the spectrum, more "liberal" intellectuals and political activists see the action as illegitimate and short-sighted. These critics argue that recognition was a setback to U.S.-Russia relations, a catalyst for problems in the North Caucasus, and a cause for international isolation. To date, these voices of dissent cannot compete with the patriotic rallying around Russian foreign policy, but as the consequences of Russian actions become clearer this dynamic could change. End Summary.

Public supports Recognition

¶2. (U) Medvedev's decision to recognize the two separatist regions met broad public support, according to initial polling surveys. In a poll published on August 27 by VTsIOM, data collected from August 16-17 indicated that 71 percent of Russians surveyed expressed support for Russia's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent nations. However, only 63 percent supported the incorporation of the two regions into the Russian Federation. Most of the population appears to accept the administration's justifications for its actions; an August 27 Levada Center poll showed that 87 percent believed Russia acted correctly in its response to the conflict. Indeed, polling shows that the population has accepted the administration's logic for taking action. When asked about the reasons for Russian military engagement in South Ossetia, those surveyed echoed the administration's own case for military intervention. Respondents listed the following reasons for action -- establishment of peace (44 percent), defense of the Ossetian population (43 percent), and defense of Russian peacekeeping force (33 percent). Only a small number, 27 percent, gave a more "cynical" assessment that the combat provided a warning to NATO.

¶3. (SBU) Polling also suggests that the broad population is more or less ambivalent about the possible costs of war. In an August 15-18 Levada Center poll, 94 percent of respondents considered relations with Georgia to be "cool" or worse, and 84 percent responded similarly when asked about Russia-U.S. relations. Moreover, 48 percent of respondents believed relations will normalize relatively soon, versus 35 percent who saw the conflict as a new turn in the "Cold War."

Kremlin Bandwagon

¶4. (U) Almost immediately after Medvedev's announcement, supporters of the Kremlin hastened to commend Medvedev's recognition decree. Putin's party "United Russia" predictably lauded Medvedev's decision as opening a new page in the history of Russia. Deputy Chairman of the Federation Council Svetlana Orlova praised Medvedev's action as "a courageous step," showing "true democracy" in protecting a "peaceful population." Konstantin Kosachev, chairman of the Duma Committee for International Affairs, echoed the pervasive stance that Russia "had been forced to recognize the breakaway republics." He maintained that relations with NATO and the EU were important only if they were beneficial to Russia, but were unnecessary if they did not serve Russian national interests and help solve Russia's problems. Kosachev saw value in these relations, if the West stopped defending Tbilisi's actions.

¶5. (U) Ostensibly "opposition parties" with ties to the Kremlin also rallied around the flag. Gennadiy Zyuganov of the Communist Party considered Medvedev's decision overdue, the only possible solution that took the South Ossetian and Abkhaz peoples' will into account, and a sign of Russia's return to the international arena. The Agrarian Party of Russia described Medvedev's decision as "reasonable," while Aleksandr Ryavkin of the Civil Force Party explained Medvedev's action as the only possible solution under the circumstances, and a "profoundly moral act" in defense of the Abkhaz and South Ossetian peoples.

¶6. (U) Beyond the political parties, nationalist organizations, Kremlin-supporters, and even representatives

MOSCOW 00002590 002 OF 003

from the Russian Orthodox Church rallied behind the recognition decision. Russian-based youth groups Nashi, Mestnii, Molodaya Gvardia, and Young Russia all posted website comments supporting Medvedev's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The groups did not promote additional protests or anti-American or anti-Georgian activity. Deputy head of the Moscow Patriarchate Department for External Church Relations Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin told Interfax on August 27 that "any unprejudiced person" clearly understood Georgia to be at fault in the conflict.

¶7. (SBU) Some commentators resorted to inflammatory language. Reactionary General-Major (ret.) Leonid Ivashov compared the situation today to the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, accused "Western forces" of organizing the conflict, and called on Russia to seek new allies in the South and East. Aleksandr Lugin of the International Eurasian Movement saw the world bordering on a sustained nuclear war. He said Russia had broken the pattern where countries were "impertinent to their fathers" (the U.S.), but always subordinated themselves in the end. Now, he said, there were two fathers, who had to delineate their spheres of influence -- Russia had just challenged the U.S. to see who is stronger. However, Lugin noted that Russia had only won a battle, not the war.

Moderates Shift to the Right

¶8. (C) Even traditionally "moderate" analysts have added their voices in support of the administration's decisions. For example, Vitaliy Naumkin, ordinarily a thoughtful critic, asserted that Medvedev's decision was the result of a long history of U.S. policy blunders. He listed the perceived lack of U.S. support for Russia during the 1990's; the missile defense (MD) program, which he stated was obviously aimed at Russia (the timing of the U.S.-Poland agreement on MD was proof, he said); the U.S. failure to freeze Georgia's NATO aspirations while tensions were high; and U.S. disregard of Georgian President Saakashvili's authoritarian and anti-democratic sides. Now Russia had restored the old balance in international relations, Naumkin contended. Naumkin told us August 27 that Russia could easily live

without NATO relations, or WTO membership. He said Russia could assure a worried Europe of its good intentions by now pushing for a peaceful and equitable resolution of the Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabach conflicts. He could not foresee any negative consequences for the situation in the North Caucuses -- in fact, he postulated that the regions in southern Russia would be happy to have buffer states between them and Georgia.

¶18. (C) Yevgeniy Satanovskiy, President of the Institute for Middle East Studies, warned that Western attempts to punish Russia for recognizing Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence would only strengthen the "national consensus" in support of the Kremlin and increase anti-American sentiment. This would further propel the GOR along the course of pursuing Russian interests at any cost. Satanovskiy said that Russians believed American ambitions had become "too big" and were fed up with the U.S. desire to have a role in every part of the world, even those where it was unclear what the U.S. interest really was. This appeared to blind the U.S. to recognizing Russian warnings that it would pursue its interests in Georgia; Satanovskiy hoped the U.S. would not misread the Kremlin's determination to do so in Ukraine.

Critical Voices Emerge

¶19. (C) Amidst the "party" atmosphere of patriotic enthusiasm for the Kremlin and its policies, there are those who opposed the administration's decision to recognize the two separatist regions and warned of the coming "hangover" of economic, political, and diplomatic consequences. As expected, the more Western-oriented liberal parties opposed both the war and the decision to recognize the two separatist regions. People's Democratic Union leader Mikhail Kasyanov and the Union of Right Forces (SPS) consider Medvedev's decision to be erroneous, leading Russia into international isolation. Moreover, the more "independent" think-tankers and foreign relations experts, who enjoy funding or support from beyond Kremlin coffers, expressed concern that the war and then recognition of the two regions would accelerate negative trends in Russian society.

¶110. (C) Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of Russia in Global Affairs, lamented to RIA Novosti that Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia would not help either to "break out" of their current international isolation and both could end up

MOSCOW 00002590 003 OF 003

like Northern Cyprus, which only Turkey has recognized for 34 years. He observed that the situation was unlikely to follow the Kosovo model, in which the U.S. was able to persuade influential countries to recognize the Serbian province's independence; Russia's current international isolation denied it similar influence. Lukyanov concluded that rather than pursue the difficult diplomatic efforts necessary to settle the Georgian crisis in a manner that could actually benefit the breakaway regions, the Kremlin opted to appeal to a domestic audience and demonstrate that Russia was unconcerned by further isolation or damage to its image. Similarly, Eurasia Foundation's Andrey Kortunov speculated to us that Medvedev's decision was "guided by emotions, not by cold-blooded calculations of political gains and losses." Kortunov expressed regret at the decision, noting that even policymakers and analysts loyal to the Kremlin questioned the rush to decide. While it would be difficult to oppose openly, Kortunov noted, many of the "politically enlightened class" remained concerned about its implications, including the economic costs.

Impact on Russia's Development

¶111. (C) Critics of the decision to recognize the two separatist regions also worry about the longer term impact on

Russia's development. Dmitry Danilov, Head of the Department of European Security Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences, said that the decision to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia demonstrated the Kremlin's willingness to increase Russian isolation. He warned that Russia, alone in a corner, could have disastrous effects. Danilov was most concerned with the domestic impact, explaining that the harsh, even crude rhetoric coming from the Kremlin during the Georgian crisis played to Russia's revanchist tendencies, which, if further enflamed, could lead Russia away from whatever progress it had made towards democracy.

¶12. (C) Political commentator Dmitriy Oreshkin similarly worried about the continued slide into "Soviet-think" and the penchant for a mobilization economic plan and increased discrepancy between reality and the constitution -- a contradiction that contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Engelhardt acknowledged that it would be impossible for President Medvedev to return to a liberal path", and added Medvedev "has lost to Putin's crowd." Engelhardt sees the tensions in the North Caucasus becoming worse, and predicted that over the next couple months North Ossetia and Ingushetia may attempt to redefine their borders.

Comment

¶13. (C) The Georgian conflict stokes all the national fires of Russian patriotism, stirring a self-righteous indignation among the population. For a society relentlessly reminded of the sacrifices made to stop the "madman" Hitler in the Second World War, the administration's message of Saakashvili's "irrational behavior" and the relentless coverage of crying women and children because of Georgian aggression resonates and rallies in a purely emotional way. Recognition, to most of Russian society, is the only possible outcome - a punishment to Georgia (and its ostensible patron, the U.S.) for violence against the innocents. The more sober-minded members of the educated elite predict that the truth will out and a more rational assessment of the causes, conduct, and consequences of the war are sure to follow. But we are not there yet.

BEYRLE